

Sulak Sivaraksa

Sulak Sivaraksa, born 1933, is a prominent and outspoken Thai intellectual and social critic. He is a teacher, a scholar, a publisher, an activist, the founder of many organisations, and the author of more than a hundred books and monographs in both Thai and English.

Educated in England and Wales, Sulak returned to Siam in 1961 at the age of 28 and founded *Sangkhomsaat Paritat* (Social Science Review). This became Siam's foremost intellectual magazine, dealing with numerous political and social issues during the time of the military dictatorship. Sulak's work editing *Sangkhomsaat Paritat* led him to become interested in grassroots issues. He learned that to truly serve society, one must stay in touch with the poor people. Beginning in the late 1960s he became involved in a number of service-oriented, rural development projects, in association with Buddhist monks and the student activist community. During the 1970s Sulak became the central figure in a number of non-governmental organisations in Siam. These include the *Komol Keemthong Foundation* (named after a young teacher killed in 1971), the *Pridi Banomyong Institute* (named after the father of Thai democracy), the *Slum Childcare Foundation*, the *Co-ordinating Group for Religion and Society*, the *Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development* and *Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute*. Through his involvement with these organisations, Sulak began to develop indigenous, sustainable, and spiritual models for change. Since then he has expanded his work to the regional and international levels. He has co-founded the *Asian Cultural Forum on Development* and the *International Network of Engaged Buddhists*.

In 1976 Siam experienced its bloodiest coup. Hundreds of students were killed and thousands were jailed. The military burnt the whole stock of Sulak's bookshop and issued an order for his arrest. Although Sulak was forced to remain in exile for two years, he was able to continue his activist work in the West. He lectured at the University of California Berkeley, Cornell University, the University of Toronto, and throughout Europe. In 1984 he was arrested in Bangkok on charges of criticising the King, but international protest led to his eventual release. In 1991 another warrant was issued for his arrest and Sulak was forced into political exile once more. He came back to fight the case in the court in 1992 and won in 1995. At the end of that year he was granted the *Right Livelihood Award*, also known as Alternative Nobel Prize.

He sees Buddhism as a questioning process. Question everything, including oneself, look deeply, and then act from that insight. He is among a handful of leaders world-wide working to revive the socially engaged aspects of spirituality. At the core of his work is a mission to build a new leadership for change at all levels, within Siam as well as outside it. Sulak has developed a unique perspective on how to work for peaceful, sustainable social change using the principles and practices of Buddhism as a personal and political resource. He has demonstrated that the interior life of spiritual contemplation, and the exterior life of political action, need not be considered opposites or hostile to each other. On the contrary, he has shown that each may be used to illuminate and inform and encourage the other, and indeed that this is essential if either is to change for the better. In his own words:

We have more than enough programs, organisations, parties, and strategies in the world for the alleviation of suffering and injustice. In fact, we place too much faith in the power of action, especially political action. Social activism tends to preoccupy itself with the external. Like the secular intellectuals, activists tend to see all malevolence as being caused by "them" - the "system" - without understanding how these negative factors also operate within ourselves. They approach global problems with the mentality of social engineering, assuming that personal virtue will result from a radical restructuring of society.

Thus, according to Sulak, those who want to change society must understand the inner dimensions of change. It is this sense of personal transformation that religion can provide. Simply performing the outer rituals of any tradition has little value if it is not accompanied by personal transformation. Religious values are those that give voice to our spiritual depth and humanity. As this transformation is achieved, we also acquire a greater moral responsibility. Spiritual considerations and social change cannot be separated. Forces in our social environment, such as consumerism, with its emphasis on craving and dissatisfaction, can hinder our spiritual development. **People seeking to live spiritually must be concerned with their social and physical environment.** To be truly religious is not to reject society but to work for social justice and change. Religion is at the heart of social change, and social change is the essence of religion.

The Sathirakoses-Nagapradeepa Foundation (SNF) founded by Sulak Sivaraksa in 1968 has become the 'mother' foundation for several sister organisations that have continued to struggle at the grassroots, national, regional and international levels for freedom, human rights, traditional cultural integrity, social justice and environmental protection. One characteristic that distinguishes SNF from other Thai NGOs is its deep commitment to spiritual development. Members of SNF believe that inner change (personal development) and outer change (political, economic, and structural changes) must go hand in hand to bring about a transformation of society.

Buddhism teaches us that the transformation of society must first begin within the self. We must nurture and cultivate compassion, wisdom, and loving-kindness in our hearts so that we can help others do the same. By practising mindfulness we awaken ourselves to the present moment and become aware of the suffering that surrounds us. The reconstruction of a spiritual, green and just society begins with this clarity in the individual mind. By awakening ourselves to suffering, we can work to change it.

Too often the environmental movement has been thought of as essentially different from the movement for social justice. This split reflects the deep, unconscious division in our minds between the human world and the natural world. The practice of spirituality and ecology seeks to reconnect these two worlds. We are asked to look into ourselves so that we can better understand our relationship with nature. We must also look deeply into nature to understand ourselves, and act from that insight. Here, spirituality and social action become united in a common vision-the vision for justice, peace, ecological sustainability, and compassion.

Siam began to move away from its Buddhist roots in the late 19th century. Increased contact with the British Empire, and later, the United States, led many Thai people, in particular the elite, to emulate Western culture. To be civilised or modern meant to be like the West, at whatever cost. Believing that material wealth is the key to happiness, many people now trade in a free market that exploits humans and destroys the environment. Some Thai companies move in to exploit neighbouring countries, acting like petty economic imperialists in the region. Cultural diversity is lost and identities are pre-packaged, manufactured en masse, and sold at the prevailing market prices. Biological diversity and natural beauty are also lost under the onslaught of logging, hydro-dams and crop monoculture smothered in pesticides. According to Sulak, "In country after country throughout Southeast Asia, policies are now being adopted to serve the needs of global firms, undermining stable communities, clean environment, and dignified work."

One of the goals of SNF is to work for structural reform at all levels of society. Members of the SNF (and its sister organisations and affiliates) serve and work with the poor and marginalised, listening to and learning from the people. They seek alternatives to the destructive patterns of living so prevalent in the world today. At the same time they also look for skilful means to transform the structural violence that supports such a pattern. Many projects, using alternative educational approach, are aimed at grassroots leaders empowerment so that they can help communities preserve cultural diversity and traditional wisdom, eradicate poverty, exploitation and oppression and promote living in harmony with nature. They also promote fair trade to support these communities to move forward to self-reliance.

Globalization (called *free market fundamentalism* and *extreme modernism* by Sulak) has led to the increasing dependence of ‘developing’ states on ‘developed’ states, increasing inequalities between the North and the South, investors and workers, agro-businesses and peasants, widening income inequalities within and between states, etc. As a result of the free market system, the natural environment in large pockets of the world is also in ruins beyond repair, threatening ecological equilibrium and human survival in general. And despite these obvious consequences, we are told that the free market system is still not free enough; there are still barriers to trade; economies have to be further deregulated or restructured at almost all costs; and so on. All these must be done in the name of progress, prosperity, development. By reciting a story of a Buddhist monk, Sulak points out that it is important to work mindfully. “Once a monk who went to see the Buddha and told him that he had been meditating for many years before he could obtain a magical power to walk on water across the river. The Buddha commented on how silly that monk was to waste so much time to achieve something that is not at all useful. If the monk wished to cross the river, the best way to do was to get a boatman and pay him two *annas*.” In Buddhism, magic is not to walk on water or to fly in the air. It is indeed miraculous to walk on earth mindfully and to attribute what mother earth contributes to the welfare of all. Reciting another Buddhist story, Sulak says, “One day a leader of a religious sect came to visit the Buddha and asked Him ‘If I follow your Way, what will I do day by day?’ The Buddha replied, ‘Walk, stand, lie down, sit eat, drink’. The religious leader then inquired- ‘what is so special about your Way?’ And the Buddha answered, ‘It is indeed special. The ordinary man, though he walks, stands, lies down, sits, eats, and drinks, does not know he is walking, standing, lying down, sitting, eating and drinking. But when we walk, we know that we are walking. When we stand, we know that we are standing.’ Well the whole point of the story is to show the virtue of mindfulness. Once the human consciousness is restructured, the world is perceived non-judgmentally; that is, without division and conflict.”

Sulak points out that if we do not exploit the earth or any aspects of nature, nature will grow holistically, heal itself and help us human beings to grow physically, mentally and spiritually. When we look at a flower mindfully, we will realize that it is indeed a very simple magic: the flower also has non-flower elements. Right now it is fresh and beautiful, but soon it will decay and die. Yet it will become compost and will be reborn as a plant, which will again produce flowers for all those who appreciate beauty and goodness. Likewise, each of us too will one day die, and our dead bodies will unite with the earth, and rebirth will take place miraculously or magically for those who wish to understand the interconnectedness of all things or the inter-being of all. Without trees, we human beings cannot survive. Scientific knowledge conditions humans to be like machines, and we perceive the world and the universe as merely composed of matters. Matters are merely things. Things have no life or feeling. Hence we destroy Mother Earth and cut down trees merely for financial gain or in the name of economic development. It all started with the Age of Enlightenment, which argues that ‘I think therefore I am’. Any being which cannot think is regarded as inferior and can therefore be exploited by those who can think. Even among thinking beings, the clever ones who can think better are in a position to exploit the weaker ones- in accordance with the Darwinian notion of survival of the fittest. Besides, the more we concentrate on thinking, the more our thought becomes compartmentalized. The deeper we think, the more we bury our thoughts and ourselves. We cannot see the wood for the trees. We are unable to perceive the world holistically. Hence the products of this thinking and our experiments with matter, scientism and technology, are unable to be questioned.

An even greater problem is that when we reach the age of economism and consumerism which goes by the name of globalization, we change the phrase ‘I think therefore I am’ into ‘I buy therefore I am.’ Hence human beings on the whole have only two aspects in life, i.e., to earn money in order to consume whatever advertisers brainwash us to purchase. Advertisers are on the whole controlled by transnational corporations, which have become more influential than any nation state, and their main objective is to exploit natural resources and human beings in the relentless pursuit of economic gain.

“If I were to go to the Buddha to ask for a very simple magic from him to rid us of our modern predicaments, he would most likely suggest the following phrase: ‘I breathe therefore I am’. Breathing is the most important element in our lives- indeed in any living being, for without breathing we will die. And breathing goes on day and night, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It never stops. Yet most of us do not take good care of our breathing. If we did, that would indeed be a simple magic.”

Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment!
Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.
Breathing out, I know that
as the in-breath grows deep,
the out-breath grows slow.
Breathing in makes me calm.
Breathing out makes me feel at ease.
With the in-breath, I smile.
With the out-breath, I release.
Breathing in, there is only the present moment.
Breathing out, it is a wonderful moment.

The above technique is called *samatha bhāvana*, which helps one to be calm or to set seeds of peace within. Then one would develop insight meditation or *vipasanā bhāvana* in order to develop critical awareness of the self, not to take the so-called self seriously. Thus one becomes less and less selfish in order to look for peace and justice in the world- with real understanding of oneself and of the world. Hence one is no longer controlled by biased views of love, hatred, fear or delusion. Our magical formula could be like this:

Let us pray for world peace, social justice, and environmental balance, which
begin with our own breathing.
I breathe in calmly and breathe out mindfully.
Once I have seeds of peace and happiness within me, I try to reduce my
selfish desire and reconstitute my consciousness.
With less attachment to myself, I try to understand the structural violence in
the world.
Linking my heart with my head, I perceive the world holistically, a sphere
full of living beings who are all related to me.
I try to expand my understanding with love to help build a more nonviolent
world.
I vow to live simply and offer myself to the oppressed.
By the grace of the Compassionate Ones and with the help of good friends,
may I be a partner in lessening the suffering of the world so that it may be a
proper habitat for all sentient beings to live in harmony during this
millennium.

Indeed the heart of Buddhist teaching has much to do with social ills. The crux of the Buddha’s teachings transcends the notion of individual salvation and is concerned with the whole realm of sentient beings or the whole consciousness. Here the inescapable conclusion is that Buddhism requires an engagement in social, economic, and political affairs. One cannot overcome the limits of the individual self in a selfish and hermetically sealed manner.

“In my view, consumerism and capitalism can be explained as the most important modern form of greed. With them, our values are geared towards satisfying the gaps in our life by ever-increasing consumption and accumulation. By failing to understand the magic of advertising we are at its mercy. This inevitably leads to conflicts of interests, and more importantly exploitations are justified by the concept of the ‘invisible hand.’ Militarism embodies hatred as its core basis. The lust for power, which leads to widespread human rights abuses, is a prime example of how hatred can manipulate individual minds and lure them to install unjust social structures in order to uphold their power.”

“The last main root cause is ignorance caused mainly by centralized education. Students are taught not to think holistically, but to compartmentalize their thinking, to memorize and to abide by the existing norms. This can help explain much of the weakening in the mobilization of student movements as well as other social movements. Often times, students are trained and equipped just with skills to become employees for multinational companies, to exploit their own fellow nationals and nature. Children also get exposed to detrimental values through television, computer games, etc., which have been replacing more and more the traditional roles played by many snobbish teachers.”

“All these sufferings can be, in my Buddhist tradition, reduced or totally extinguished by the right understanding of the nature of things. Buddhism is unique as its approach is not reinforced by faith, but rather by practice. Thus, to attain understanding, one has to really experiment with the truths themselves. Aloofness is never a value praised by us. Buddhism also gives me a sense of inter-belonging. With this view, I feel the inter-relatedness of all beings. It helps to internally affirm a common phrase among Buddhists that we all are ‘friends in common suffering.’”

“Thus, my Buddhist model of development must begin with everyone truly practicing to understand himself or herself. In the Buddhist tradition, we call it *citta sikkha* or the contemplation on mind. Meditation is important for us to attain the insight, the qualities of which include alertness and criticality. Critical self-awareness is thus important for us, and this will help the practitioners to feel more empowered to criticize themselves. From the critical understanding of one’s self, we can begin to try to critically understand our community, society, nation and eventually our world. From criticizing ourselves, we hold the critical awareness towards society and the government, and all the establishments in order to understand how these mechanisms of greed, hatred and ignorance operate and manipulate at the structural levels. Bearing in mind the solutions, we also feel hopeful to articulately use all non-violent means to achieve a peaceful end.”

“Buddhist tenets also help me feel closer to and eventually to be one with the majority. In our tradition, it is believed that every being embodies a Buddha nature, or the potential to attain the highest understanding. Thinking this way, I feel the equality among all of us regardless of rank and status. And I feel that the poor are entitled to the same dignity as us to struggle for what they should be given.”

“As people who wanted to raise awareness about the harmful effects of globalization it was crucial for us to identify what we are working against. Now it is time for us to come together to identify what we are working for. It is time for those of us who are angry and frustrated to release this anger- we cannot speak hate to power, we must confront power with truth and with peace. Anger prevents one of the highest ideals of Buddhism- compassion for all sentient beings. Through acting with compassion we will realize that dualism or attachment to strict categories of good/evil, repressive/liberating, east/west is a misguided path. Categories can only limit us and often force us to act in ways that are not true to our experiences or ideals. Instead of letting categorical labels guide our actions, we must have compassion for all beings and seek the transformation of individuals and of structures.”

“One must share (*dāna*) what one has with others- be it goods, wealth, knowledge, time, labor, etc. Generosity is the most potent antidote to the consumerism that drives globalization. To a large extent, *dāna* is still practiced in most village cultures. We should strengthen the concept of *dāna* and spread it to counteract the invasion of materialism and the ethos of competition by sharing, by leading less commercialized lifestyles.”

Economic growth at the cost of the poor has become the driving force of globalization even though world leaders try to hide the face by cosmetic measures and rhetoric. Undeniably, the fuel that keeps the capitalist engine running is profit: the more of it, the better, the argument goes. Hence, corporations must be free to pursue it- at all costs. The ends justify the means. It is also argued that the profit generated by the system will eventually trickle down to benefit the mass of humanity. The available evidence points otherwise. To be fair, capitalism does generate some benefits to humanity, *but they are largely unintended by-products of the system*. Capitalism works by exploiting labor and natural resources in order to concentrate wealth in the hands of an elite group. For maximum results, capitalism alienates humans from their communities, families, and ultimately, their spiritual selves by posting worth solely in terms of economic value. The atomistic individual, rather than a larger community, is at the center of the capitalist system. Consumerism is able to dominate much of contemporary society because individuals have become alienated from their culture and from each other. The sense of community that led people to share scarce resources and work cooperatively has been supplanted by the vile maxims of the masters of mankind, by an anger and competitiveness that causes people to seek acquisitions at the expense of their neighbors. In sum, consumerism is a consequence of using greed and violence to regulate socioeconomic relations. At the most profound level, consumerism owes its vitality to the delusion of the autonomous individual self; a self that exists independently of social relations and of human relations with nature: a human person thrown into the world. For the Buddha was clear that the 'self' constitutes only a pattern of persistently changing experiences that had no more substance or permanence than those experiences. Consumerism provides an artificial means of defining our existence by suggesting that identity is realized through the process of acquisition. Put differently, consumerism is a perverse corollary of the Cartesian proof of personal existence: 'I shop therefore I am.' For the Buddhists, this delusion is the fundamental cause of suffering. Ontologically, we become estranged aspects of our experiences of others and ourselves. Hence we are precluded from any meaningful conception of identity and consumerism or insatiable consumption is equated with ultimate happiness and freedom, with self-realization. As David Arnott, an English Buddhist, explains

By participating in the sacrament of purchase, sacrificing money, we can buy an object that is not so much an object as a focus of images which grants us a place in the system of images we hold sacred. For a while when we buy a car we also buy the power, prestige, sexuality, success, which the advertisements have succeeded in identifying with the car, or whatever the commodity is. Consumerism works by identifying the sense of unsatisfactoriness or lack (*dukkha*) we all hold at a deep level of mind and then producing an object guaranteed to satisfy that 'need.'

Capitalism depends on greed, delusion, and hatred in order to become entrenched in society and in the individual and is thus, anathema to the goals of Buddhism. When an individual places self-interest above all and negates the relational idea 'self,' the result is greed and selfishness. Neo-liberalism rhetoric deludes people and international organizations into believing that profits from multinational corporations will be fairly distributed in society and that any improvement in material conditions is an absolute gain for society. The ideology of consumerism deludes people into believing that constant acquisition of goods and power will lead to happiness. Lastly, competitive consumerism depends on callousness and hatred to prevent people from forming coalitions to challenge the existing system. Hatred is a force which paralyzes and prevents self-transformation and cooperative strategies.

In Buddhism, prosperity is defined as 'more being.' As such, it cannot be realized atomistically, only collectively and with an emphasis on spirituality. Buddhism denounces and renounces greed, because it is seen as leading one down the perfidious road of aggression and hatred- in a word, of suffering. Greed can never lead to satisfaction, individually or collectively. Thus Buddhism seeks to show how to be content with changing oneself- that is, self-cultivation- and emphasizes the importance of caring about, promoting, and benefiting from one another's wellbeing. Whereas capitalism treats a person as only half-

human- the economic dimension e.g., greed, hatred, and selfishness is cultivated to the exclusion of other considerations- Buddhism approaches a human person holistically. The mind and heart must be cultivated, and diversity must be nourished in social relations and in human relations with nature. A human person is an 'interbeing' existing within a web of relations that includes all sentient beings.

In contrast to the modern notion of frantic, ceaseless consumption, the Buddha said that tranquility is the most important prerequisite for self-cultivation and self-criticism, for the true understanding (*prajñā*) of the self. It should be pointed out that understanding is different from intellectual knowledge, since it is filtered through both the heart and the mind. Understanding helps the individual to recognize his or her limits and to be more humble. At the same time, it promotes loving kindness and compassion: the individual will be in a better position to witness the suffering of others and to help eliminate the cause of suffering. Of course, when one tackles the cause of suffering, particularly in an oppressive social system, one usually gets hurt. Instead of basing all interpersonal relations on social obligation or an economic calculation about what we can gain from another person Buddhism uses the principles of *mettā* (loving kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity) to be the guiding forces in interpersonal relations.

In December 1997, the *Alternatives to Consumerism* programme brought together a great diversity of persons and organization striving to realize alternatives-to-the-mainstream in a range of professional fields and cultural sectors. Representatives from many traditions came together to discuss the causes and symptoms of consumerism and visions for the future. The *Alternatives to Consumerism* gathering drafted a declaration of intent to encourage the growth of varied local alternatives in education, trade, industry, agriculture and politics and promote and strengthen communities which are inclusive, self-reliant, holistic and supportive of each other. The *Assembly of the Poor* is one such organization. Mind-deadened and long-subdued, that is how the Thai ruling elites generally perceive the country's poor, an attitude that is similarly shared by their counterparts elsewhere. The emergence of the *Assembly of the Poor* proved wrong their assumptions, and the ruling class feels irritated and frustrated, if not threatened. The rabble are no longer in line. As the Assembly put it, "we are not satisfied with being nothing more than cheap cheering crowds in electoral games." The *Assembly of the Poor* has a history of protests against injustices and externalities resulting from the government's developmental policy and economic globalization; for example, forced relocation without adequate compensation due to the construction of dams, industrial pollution, and increased indebtedness of small farmers who are being uprooted by giant agribusiness.

The *Assembly* is perhaps an unprecedented movement in Siam and is one of the bright signs of the emergence of non-violent grassroots democracy in Southeast Asia. It is a sustained grassroots movement and at its heart are urban and rural small-scale agriculturists and manual laborers. They form the absolute majority in the movement. Non-governmental organizations, environmentalists, responsible intellectuals, students, and some individuals from the business community strengthen the sinews of the Assembly. Simply put, the movement is able to transcend class and regional divisions; a significant portion of the middle class, which has traditionally tended to serve as buffers between the rich and the poor and hence perpetuating the elitist and unjust system, now supports the cause of the poor. Together they help voice the grievances and advance the interests of the poor in mainstream politics.

The Buddhist response to deforestation is a clear example of the tension between anthropocentrism and a holistic understanding of the web of life and the importance of the forest. Traditional Buddhist communities revolved around a forest monastery and this *wat* was the center of political, spiritual, and educational life. Living in harmony with the forest was the reality and there was not the forest/town division that existed in many European societies. However, once the process of industrialization began in Southeast Asia, forests became fuel-giving sources rather than life-giving sources. In Thailand, the Royal Forest Department (RFD) promoted the destruction of forests in order to cultivate eucalyptus for the pulp and paper industries. First the government ordered the destruction of thousands of hectares of

forests and then, sensing the damage and the pressure from outside groups, the government ordered the protection of certain forests. Many of these newly protected areas were the homes of indigenous people and local people who had lived for generations in harmony with the forest but under the protective legislation could not maintain their livelihood. The media characterized these people as ‘backward’ and reckless in their use of natural resources; the government was the savior and local people became the aggressors. In Burma, the concept of community forests is used as propaganda in order to hasten the monoculture of eucalyptus; governments cannot be the only source of decision-making, it is imperative that local knowledge about sustainability is given primacy.

A renewed interest in Buddhist tree ordination ceremonies is one way to raise awareness about local ecology and celebrate nature. These ordination ceremonies are similar to forest robes ceremonies where laypeople present monks with clothes, food, and offerings for the temple. At a tree ordination ceremony, the tree is sanctified by monastic robes and as pointed out by Darlington “the robes [stand] as a reminder that to harm or cut the tree- or any of the forest- [is] an act of demerit.” These trees are important markers of the sacredness of nature but education is necessary to connect this sacredness with the everyday patterns of consumption, waste disposal, and water pollution.

Raising the consciousness about natural resources should start before a threat of destruction. Preventive measures such as education and celebration are part of the Buddhist environmental movement in Siam. The Moo Ban Dek school in Kanchanaburi was established to provide poor children with a nurturing environment for the development of heart, mind, and will. The concept of education extends beyond intellectual cultivation to the development of civic participation, environmental education, and spiritual understanding. Children at the school have a responsibility for self-government and self-discipline. Each day time is set aside for doing chores, caring for animals and for swimming in the river. The annual Dhamma Walk is another way of spurring a change in the concept of nature and community. The walk has been successful in starting a conversation about these issues.

Alternative communities are one way for communities to regain control of local resources. Alternative communities also seek to transform economic relations by making consumers aware of the production cycle and encouraging economic transactions that are embedded in the social life of the community. Using natural resources for local production and distribution encourages the responsible use of resources with a constant attention to sustainability.

Small businesses committed to ethical environmental practices are at the base of the deep ecology movement. The need to find practical alternatives to the current system is one of our biggest challenges. Although eco-consumption and eco-tourism can become warped representations of environmental ideals, they may be used as skillfull means to help us achieve a critical mass of environmentally conscious people.

Like simplicity, humility implies the respect for all sentient beings. Once we are humble, we co-exist with each other as equals. The belief that one is exceptional or superior, for whatever reasons, is a major wall that hinders meaningful and compassionate human and social relations. Blinded by exceptionalism, one sees the world in absolute terms. If one is always right or good, then the others are always wrong or evil. Hence one can take whatever measures to right the wrongs. Only when this wall is torn down will we really begin to *see* the consequences of our actions. Additionally, valuing equality, we will not treat the suffering of individuals or groups walking on the borders of society with callous equanimity. Rather we will struggle for greater social justice and equality. Equality does not always have to mean sameness. It can also refer to justice. In the latter sense, equality requires treating people differently under different circumstances such as providing unequal shares to unequals. Moreover, equality tends to denote a leveling up process; for instance, being like the rich and powerful. However, to continue with the example, we seem to forget that if the rich make a sharp turn towards simplicity and share their wealth with the poor equality can also be attained. Mahatma Gandhi is often quoted as stating, “There is enough in the world for everyone’s need, but not for some people’s greed.”

With humility we will be able to transcend racial, national, cultural, ideological, and religious

boundaries (real or imagined) and form a circle of the virtuous, or what the Buddhists called *kalyanamittatā*. Now this is tremendously important because some of the most threatening menaces to human wellbeing and environmental sustainability are transnational in character. And the circle of the virtuous must be extended to incorporate members of the power elites, of the transnational capitalist class. They must be treated as friends, not as enemies or demons. And together we shall embark on changes, however incremental, which will awake the humanity- as opposed to being half-human like the economic man, the nationalist, etc- in each and every one of us. We need not be dialecticians to understand that transnational cooperation, in particular of the bottom-up genre, is facilitated by the very same forces that lubricate the wheels of globalization.

It is very important to understand that nonviolence is an effective and very powerful response to conflict. It does not mean doing nothing. It is actually a powerful force that can be acted upon. Peace is not merely the absence of war. Peace is a proactive, comprehensive process of finding ground through open communication and putting into practice a philosophy of non-harm and sharing resources. Creating a culture of peace is an active process. When confronted with large-scale conflicts there is no question that they demand a response. The problem is that many people believe that a nonviolent response means doing nothing whereas responding with force or violence means doing something. The Middle Way of Buddhism defines very well how one should respond to violence. It is about avoiding extremes. The extremes being doing nothing on the one hand or responding with similar violence on the other. However, it is also important to examine structural violence. We should not limit our thinking to believing that violence is limited merely to acts of war or terrorism. Every day 40,000 people starve to death in a world where there is an abundance of food. The global economic system enriches a few while everyday more and more people are pushed into living in poverty. Twenty percent of the world's population has over eighty percent of the world's wealth. In order for a few to enjoy wealth others must be deprived of a decent livelihood. This is really one of the world's greatest injustices. The problem with structural violence is that it is difficult to see it. Many people just dismiss it by saying that's the way things are or there is no other way. Many people similarly dismiss nonviolence because they are unable to see how it can be effective. It doesn't attract the same headlines as violence. Many people don't see how it can be a solution. The roots of much global conflict lie in this structural violence. The economic forces of globalisation, forced upon much of the world by the countries of the North, transnational corporations and the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank, IMF and WTO), not only condemn many to living in poverty but they provide a breeding ground for hatred and greed which in turn gives rise to violence. The demonic religion of consumerism is based on promoting greed and in the name of this greed all sorts of violence is committed. The mass media is controlled by the transnational corporations and their reporting is not independent. The mass media is in fact part of the problem of structural violence. It distorts peoples world views and preaches the religion of consumerism. It works hand in hand with the TNCs to promote a lifestyle of consumerism and create a global monoculture. Television effectively brainwashes people and acts a propaganda machine for TNCs. It deludes people into thinking that the more goods they accumulate the happier they will be. It totally denies the fact that the attainment of such a consumer lifestyle is unattainable by the majority of the world's people. It is simply an ecological impossibility. By overcoming structural violence we could prevent much of the violent conflict we see in the world today. I would now like to consider how nonviolence can provide a very effective response in situations of global conflict.

We need to hold the great powers and transnational corporations accountable for the consequences of their action or inaction: constant surveillance or monitoring of their activities and the exposure of their hidden agendas and wrong doings are imperative. As such, we must first attempt to correct the power asymmetry between the powerful and the marginalized by creating transnational alliances. Counter-currents are gathering force at the grassroots worldwide, advocating meaningful democracy and human rights promotion and decrying the abuse of power by the 'enlightened' states. Hence, unlike the nonaligned and the New International Economic Order movements in the 1950s and 60s, these remarkably

diverse transnational movements are organized from the 'bottom up,' comprising members from both the North and the South. Do not underestimate the power of transnational grassroots movements. We need to apply what has been called the 'Lilliput strategy.' We need to 'act locally and think globally.' Seemingly disparate local strings may collectively be sufficiently strong to tie down the Gulliver of 'enlightened' states and transnational corporations/capital. Especially when it comes to containing the pace of corporate-sponsored globalization, we must realize that 'any attack on capitalist consumerism is an attack to the very center of global capitalism.' Consumerism, which promotes dependency on 'market forces' in every aspect of life, is the culture-ideology of the present global economic system. Numerous communities and movements worldwide have sought alternatives to consumerism by practicing simple, self-reliant, self-sufficient, and sustainable ways of life. Some of them have, for example, launched local currencies, cooperatives, and credit unions, and experimented with traditional/natural farming, small-scale businesses, community businesses, etc. These are good and hopeful signs. So it is from the grassroots up that we should start organizing, networking, creating transnational alliances- recognizing that the fate of democracy and human rights in the 21st century really lies in the hands of the masses.

In order to create a culture of peace, first we must make society more just, more fair, and give equal rights to all people. The imposition of so-called peace has, in fact, at times been used as a tool of suppression. Look at the many programs for pacification taken throughout history and the world. In many cases, the institutionalised definition of peace is tantamount to the suppression of righteous struggles for equal rights and justice. In other cases, the institutionalisation of peace is really propaganda for maintaining the status quo of an unjust government or system. Thus the development of a culture of peace really begins at ground level. If we act nonviolently and create a culture of peace then we can ensure that we have long-term peace. The USA has the world's largest military, but nothing could protect it from what happened on the 11th of September. Only a nonviolent response can provide it with protection against further attacks.

Our educational approach, like our activities, is 'holistic' (as opposed to compartmentalized) and generally interfaith. We seek to cultivate both the mind and the heart and to develop individuals and society in various dimensions. We blend Dhammic values (e.g., mindfulness, compassion, and morality) with traditional Asian wisdom and alternative Western views. Education must not only facilitate individuals to meet their basic material requirements but also empower them socially, culturally, politically, and, a point which cannot be overemphasized, spiritually. The impact of education must be both immediate as well as profound. Of course, all these must be performed against the backdrop of environmental sustainability. To recapitulate, in our literacy campaign, we attempt to facilitate the realization of the individual's full potentials holistically; to heighten empathy and compassion for others; and to nourish diversity in social relations and in relations with nature. We realize that advancement in technologies, rapid economic growth, and material wellbeing at the expense of, among other things, spiritual decline and environmental disaster is no progress.

To work towards these ends, we have, for many years, been training and educating grassroots community leaders via experiential learning techniques in the concepts of empowerment, participatory development, and sustainable community economics. These leaders are important agents of community development and environmental conservation. Simply put, our vision is to help reduce the asymmetry of power between the privileged and the marginalized and to create a community in lieu of a marketplace. (Even multibillionaire George Soros recognizes the adverse implications of creating, in his own words, a 'market society'.)

We help foster the establishment/networking of communities that are by and large self-reliant, self-sufficient, and participatory; that live in harmony with the natural environment; that are contented with their cultures, identities, and (as it turned out, more appropriate) lifestyles; and that are concerned about broad issues of justice, locally, nationally, and internationally. In so doing, we attempt to help preserve cultural diversity and traditional wisdom. Our activities are carried out not only in Siam but also in

neighboring countries.

Moreover, in rural Southeast Asia, poverty can be vastly alleviated and exploitation reduced if local communities move towards greater self-reliance; *that is, if the poor could provide collectively for their own needs through their own resourcefulness and skills, employing a modest share of the earth's resources*. In fact, self-reliance was one of the hallmarks of Southeast Asian- and Buddhist- communities. Finding alternatives to market dependency and consumerism does not mean living in holes and digging roots to eat! For example, the sustainable community economic model emphasizes local production for local consumption (e.g., via the establishment of credit unions, cooperative shops, and appropriately scaled income-generating businesses). Money must circulate locally as much as possible. Since priority is given to meeting local needs rather than to exporting or fulfilling the needs of the rich in urban areas, this means that industries or businesses are small-scale, taking from the environment no more than is locally needed. *It must be noted that there is no specific blueprint for setting up sustainable communities: a lot depends on the local culture and the diversity and availability of local resources*.

The development/networking of strong, participatory, self-reliant, and self-sustaining communities will serve as the necessary bulwark against economic exploitation and cultural domination, and therefore will provide the necessary launching pad for the poor to prosper socially, economically, culturally, and spiritually *in harmony with nature*. As a direct by-product, the civil society will be strengthened for the poor would be able to participate more meaningfully in the state's decision-making process; they would have more power to influence decisions democratically.

In Buddhism there is a saying that goes as follows. If a monarch upholds dhamma, his officials will do likewise. The head of each household and the clerics will also uphold dhamma- and so will all the citizens. When all the inhabitants of the society practice dhamma, there will be equilibrium in nature. In other words, there is a connection between morality, beauty, and harmony in nature. Buddhism envisages moral conduct as the natural state of being, as natural as the cycles of nature.

Technology and modernity- often couched in terms such as progress and civilization- are uprooting and destroying the traditional way of living and the traditional conception of beauty and goodness. Ugliness is supplanting beauty. The color of goodness is now gray. The quest for truth is now steered by falsity and injustice, is now guided by money and power. All this is done in the name of 'being civilized' or Western civilization. Science and technology are said to provide the answer to every question. The fact that the latest science and technology may trample beauty and goodness is easily and conveniently discarded. For instance, self-reliance has immeasurably weakened; nature is raped and diversity is not nourished in human relations with nature; and millions of people are being exploited in the name of progress.